

**Statement of Chairman Tom Davis**  
**H.R. 2556, D.C. Parental Choice Incentive Act of 2003**  
**Committee on Government Reform**  
**2154 Rayburn House Office Building**  
**Business Meeting**  
**July 10, 2003**

Today we are going to consider the District of Columbia Parental Choice Incentive Act of 2003, H.R. 2556 – introduced by Education and Workforce Chairman John Boehner and myself.

This bill would provide relief to some of the long-standing challenges facing students in the District of Columbia public school system. The “DC Parental Choice Incentive Act of 2003” would authorize the appropriation of \$15 million in new federal funding to the District of Columbia to provide individual students up to \$7500 in scholarship money to be used at private schools of their own choosing in the District of Columbia.

One thing is clear: too many kids in our Nation’s capital are not getting the education they need and fully deserve. Lower-income families concerned about the quality and safety of their children in District of Columbia public schools should not have to resign to sending their children to under-performing schools where students are not adequately motivated to perform.

At the same time, a school should not take for granted that it will automatically enroll every child that lives within a given radius of the school.

Instead, that school should be striving everyday to ensure that it provides a learning environment that will attract new students and parents.

Over the past decade, Congress has spent considerable time and resources working with the District to reform its education system. Enacted laws, such as the “District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995” and the “D.C. College Access Act of 1999”, have provided an impetus to level the playing field and brighten the future for D.C. students.

However, the ability of D.C. schools to meet key performance goals has long been plagued by financial mismanagement as well as a host of other problems. Despite concerted efforts by local officials to improve the public school system, little evidence of progress in improving academic performance is available.

Poor academic achievement scores are unsettling to say the least: only 6% of 4th graders in the District tested “proficient” or higher in math.

Standardized test scores remain stagnant for D.C. public schools: the average D.C. SAT score is 799 while the national average is 1020.

The National Assessment of Educational Process just released a “Reading 2000” Report Card: the District’s school children were ranked as the worst readers in the country.

The disparity is too glaring to ignore. The drop out rate is about 40 percent. The current condition of schools is unacceptable.

I have traditionally opposed federal dollars going to private schools because I think federal dollars ought to be targeted to public schools. But, for the District, I think we have to ask this question: wouldn't more choices funded by federal dollars provide a needed alternative for low-income children attending low-performing schools?

As the United States Representative representing a district neighboring the District of Columbia, I have worked with the District on a number of initiatives to improve the standard of living in the District of Columbia, and along with it, the standard of living of the entire capital region. That is why I cannot ignore the grave challenges facing the District of Columbia public school system and that is why I have introduced the "DC Parental Choice Incentive Act of 2003."

The goal of school choice in the District of Columbia is to be an addition, not a subtraction. We all want the District's education system to improve, and this is at the very least a short-term effort to do something about it.

This would expand educational opportunities to D.C. students in under-performing elementary and secondary schools. The D.C. Choice Program would be established through a competitive process administered by the U.S. Department of Education to ensure that the public or private entity administering the initiative would be dedicated and capable of carrying out a top-notch program.

The D.C. Choice Program would provide scholarships of up to \$7500 to eligible students to cover the cost of tuition, fees, and transportation expenses, if any. The scholarship would be considered assistance to the students and not the schools. In order to ensure accountability, an evaluation would be conducted that would consider the impact and academic achievement attained by the program.

This legislation is the result of considerable negotiation and consultation with city officials, the Administration and the key committees of jurisdiction in Congress. And for the first time ever, the Mayor of the District of Columbia has come to the conclusion that "...if done effectively, this program would provide even more choices for primarily low-income families who currently do not have the same freedom of choice enjoyed by their affluent counterparts."

####